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Léon Bloy's Books of Revelation

Abstract
Prominent among fine-de-siècle reactionary Catholics, Léon Bloy regarded literature as an instrument of the Apocalypse. Inspired by the 1846 apparition of the Virgin Mary at La Salette, Bloy believed that unless the wicked reformed, the end of time would come soon and engulf Christendom in fire. Subscribing to the principle of Dolorism, Bloy identified with the wretched whose suffering liquidated the debt of sin accumulated over centuries. In Bloy's eschatological fiction, he complains of a Savior slow to rescue the disinherited. Bloy sees his novels as elucidating the divine message that time has garbled. As Bloy's hero, Caïn Marchenoir, explains: «Toute chose terrestre est ordonnée par la Douleur […] Elle n'était pas seulement le but, […] elle était la logique même de ces Écritures mystérieuses, dans lesquelles il supposait que la Volonté de Dieu devait être lue». This is the purpose of Bloy's writing: to supersede the Gospels whose cryptogram it decodes, and turn the opaqueness of God's book into the transparency of Bloy's exegesis.

Fin-de-siècle authors whose works belong to a literature of cultural decadence often harbored hopeful expectations that the end times were approaching. Already in *À rebours*, J.-K. Huysmans's defeated esthete, Jean Floressas des Esseintes, had bemoaned the mounting tide of mediocrity and materialism. Summoning a vengeful Jehovah to appear and smite the wicked, he had called for a reenactment of «les cataclysmes éteints», a raining down of the «pluies de flammes qui consumèrent les cités jadis reprouvées»[1]. In his raging vaticinations, des Esseintes had welcomed an apocalypse that would exterminate a world in which he felt himself to be a superior outsider. «Eh! croule donc, société! meurs donc, vieux monde!»[2] as Huysmans's hero clamored before vacating his Thebaïd en route to Paris.

In 1884, at the time of the publication of *À rebours*, neither Huysmans nor his character entertained a clear millenarian vision. Incredulity still fought against their inchoate wish for faith, and without a belief in God, the future remained a closed and black horizon – unillumined by «les consolants fanaux du vieil espoir»[3].

However, anticipation of the apocalypse, in its etymological sense as *revelation*, presumes that the midnight of calamity will be followed by a new dawn. The chiliasm of both Huysmans and Léon Bloy rests on the conviction that the more overwhelming today's evil, the more joyful tomorrow's deliverance. For both writers, the oppression of the poor who underwent the Passion every day must grow heavier, more scandalous so that the messianic return should come more speedily. It is this that accounts for the hope that underlies these authors' sense of gloom and that explains why the apparent triumph of iniquity is a portent of salvation. As Jean-Marie Seillan writes

(1) J.-K. Huysmans, *À rebours*, in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 12, Genève, Slatkine, 1977, pp. 348-349.
(2) *Ibid.*, p. 348.
(3) *Ibid.*, p. 349.

of Huysmans in a comment that applies to Bloy: «il peut être nécessaire d'aggraver le sort des victimes puisque c'est de la catastrophe seule qu'un bien pourra sortir»[4].

Like Huysmans, Bloy expressed dissatisfaction with a derelict God who was slow to anger, who for too long had restrained the punishing fist that would strike the hedonist and unbeliever. Both Bloy and Huysmans professed acceptance of Church teaching, yet at the same time they behaved like refractory children, exhibiting an insubordination that moved them to question an absentee Savior, «dont il[s] pressentai[ent] la prochaine Venue, quoiqu'il ait l'air de dormir profondément depuis tant de siècles»[5]. As God failed to sanction transgressors or to raise up the stricken, he was chided for his inaction. For Bloy especially, as this paper argues, the writer was both an accuser and a prophet, using his text of vatic indignation to incite the dilatory messiah, whom Bloy hoped «à force de clameurs désespérées, faire, une bonne fois, crouler de son ciel»[6].

It was against a backdrop of increasing laicization, economic liberalism, and democratic reform that Bloy and Huysmans saw institutional Catholicism as coming under attack, beleaguered by forces of secularism and money-worship, all harbingers of the coming *Weltuntergang*. In *L'Oblat* (1903), Huysmans had impugned the motivations of Pope Leo XIII himself, accusing him of harboring sympathy for republican ideas and social reforms. Horrified by his vision of a world controlled by Satanists and Freemasons, Huysmans anticipated a cleansing Armageddon.

Léon Bloy (1846-1917), today a largely forgotten literary figure, is often counted among those whom John Coombes calls the "*grands exaspérés*"[7]. The most full-throated of the Catholic reactionaries of the fin-de-siècle, Bloy propounded a political ideology that was «antirationalist, antidemocratic, and anti-Semitic»[8], which he combined with a mystical expectation of eschatological catastrophism. More than Huysmans, Bloy displayed a paranoid discernment of omens of approaching doom, and so evolved his own cult of suffering, poverty, and degradation. Fueling his diatribes against charity-sponsoring society ladies, Bloy's outrage at the apotheosis of the wealthy caused him to predict the redemption of the indigent. The nihilism of both Huysmans and Bloy assumes a paradoxically regenerative quality since, only when nothing remains and the devastation is complete, can the Holy City rise up from a blasted world.

In foretelling the end time, Bloy uses his text to diffuse into an audience that harkens to his warnings. Readers become converts joining a community of the misbegotten, the lowly, and wretched raised up by Bloy's prophesy. On Judgment Day, the doomsayer escapes the desert of his loneliness. «This», as Mortimer Ostow writes, «is the source of fascination of the apocalypse: the opportunity to act out one's fury upon a target and to be rewarded for doing so by the sense of messianic deliverance into a loving and blessed group that will survive the cataclysm»[9].

For Bloy, the dream of millenarian retribution had been caused by resentment that literary celebrity had eluded him, that his books had not sold better, and that others enjoyed the fame that was rightly his. Worthlessness became for Bloy an emblem of distinction: those subjected to contumely in this world would be crowned with glory in the next. Bloy's personal discontent became a matter of cosmic portent.

(4) J.-M. Seillan, *Huysmans: politique et religion*, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2009, p. 396.

(5) L. Bloy, *Le Désespéré*, Paris, Union Générale d'Editions, 1983, p. 181.

(6) *Ibid.*

(7) J. Coombes, «Léon Bloy», *Dictionary of Literary Biography 123: Nineteenth-Century French Fiction Writers: Naturalism and Beyond*, ed. by C. Brosman, Detroit, Gale Research, 1992, p. 16.

(8) *Ibid.*

(9) M. Ostow, «Apocalyptic Thinking in the Nuclear Age», *Psychoanalysis and the Nuclear Threat*, edited by H. Levine, D. Jacobs, and L. Rubin, Hillsdale, The Analytic Press, 1988, p. 272.

As Rayner Heppenstall writes, «all his life, Bloy exhibited symptoms of persecution mania»[10]. Singled out for denigration by the successful writers whom Bloy envied and hated, Bloy cast himself as Jesus whose Passion rehabilitated both himself and the poor with whom he felt a sense of solidarity.

As Bloy's angry prophesy is meant to force God to come down, it also elevates the visionary, conferring power on his words, endowing him with the power of the Logos. More importantly, in assuming the role of the ill-treated child, Bloy usurps the father's power, paradoxically by rivaling with Christ in his capacity for suffering. As God the Father made a world filled with misfortune and injustice, the Son undoes the world's evil by undergoing the Crucifixion. In Bloy's delineation of the relationship between God and his afflicted creatures, there is a reallocation of gratitude, a reassignment of guilt: «en attendant que tout se consomme, l'exilé du Paradis ne peut prétendre qu'au seul bonheur de souffrir pour Dieu»[11].

For Bloy's paranoid mystic, everything is a sign, history becomes a cryptogram, and «le mot *Hasard*» is «un intolérable blasphème»[12]. When read through the deciphering intelligence of the visionary for whom the record of human events is a text of pain, the desultoriness of events assumes a new teleological clarity. Life, ordered by the explanatory semiosis of purposeful suffering, moves toward the apocalypse, when meaninglessness will give way to revelation. If, as Cyndy Hendershot says, paranoia is associated «with knowledge and knowledge-producing systems»[13], religion acquires the value of a universal hermeneutic. This, to Bloy, is the merit of eschatological literature: that it relieves the pain of its gratuitousness and becomes its own explanatory language. As Bloy's hero, Caïn Marchenoir, explains: «Toute chose terrestre est ordonnée pour la Douleur. Or, cette Douleur, était, à ses yeux, le commencement comme elle était la fin. Elle n'était pas seulement le but, le comminatoire propos ultérieur, elle était la *logique* même de ces Écritures mystérieuses, dans lesquelles il supposait que la Volonté de Dieu devait être lue»[14]. Bloy's writing supersedes the Gospels whose cryptogram it decodes, turning the opaqueness of God's book into the transparency of Bloy's exegesis. Washing away «la suie du passé», passing it through «la symbolique des larmes», pain is felt, expressed, interpreted, and assuaged.

For Bloy and Marchenoir, his fictional alter ego, history had emerged from unintelligibility into the light of understanding, when, on September 19, 1846, the Virgin Mary had appeared to two illiterate cowherds, Mélanie Calvat and Maximin Giraud, in the mountain hamlet of La Salette. As described by Bloy in *Celle qui pleure* (1908), Mary had charged the two witnesses with warning the faithful of the consequences of their transgressions: the profanation of the Sabbath and the waywardness of the priesthood. Sparkling in a gown woven of flame, her hair wreathed in flowers of unearthly beauty, the Virgin had cautioned the Catholic world against the worst of their failings: the tepidity of their faith, their desire to buy salvation with cost-free acts of ostentatious charity. «Si mon peuple ne veut pas se soumettre», Mary admonished, «je suis forcée de laisser aller le bras de Mon Fils»[15].

For Bloy, the weeping Mother completes the work done by her bleeding Son. The relationship that links the Lord to his Church is the same that binds the Virgin to her human children who, through the absoluteness of their hunger, distress, and hu-

(10) R. Heppenstall, *Léon Bloy*, New Haven, Yale UP, 1954, p. 39.
(11) L. Bloy, *Le Symbolisme de l'Apparition*, Paris, Payot et Rivages, 2008, p. 31.
(12) L. Bloy, *Le Désespéré* cit., p. 175.
(13) C. Hendershot, *Paranoia and the Delusion of the Total System*, «American Imago», 54, 1997, p. 16.
(14) L. Bloy, *Le Désespéré* cit., pp. 177-178.
(15) L. Bloy, *Le Symbolisme de l'Apparition* cit., p. 31.

miliation issue a call to God to fill their nothingness with the totality of his presence. As a desiccated Christ had thirsted for the repentance of those he saved (*sitio*), Mary, Bloy writes, «a soif de nos larmes»[16]. Eve, whom God had punished by multiplying the pain of childbearing, bore sons who were different from Jesus, conceived in immaculacy. Yet by crying with remorse, man is cleansed of sin, becoming the offspring of his penance, "*filius tantarum lacrymarum*"[17].

It was from his predecessor and fellow millenarian Ernest Hello (1828-1885) that Bloy drew his idea of the language of tears – tears which, as in the Act of Contrition – acquire an operational efficacy, making the weak man strong like Samson who, in the middle of the night, took on his shoulders the gates of his prison and carried them to the mountain. The gift of crying is given by God, as Hello writes in *Paroles de Dieu* (1899): «Les prières et les larmes sont les instruments de combat qu'il nous met entre les mains, car c'est lui qui nous les donne, c'est lui qui nous prépare et qui nous arme pour le combat qu'il nous ordonne de lui livrer»[18].

In the struggle joined by Hello and Bloy, it is the father who equips the child to challenge his authority. Tears are not a sign of weakness. Instead, the child's victimization makes him a warrior whose weakness turns to force.

Bloy's sense of the majesty of the poor also stems from Hello's opposition of man's emptiness to God's plenitude, his belief in the mystical passage from the *néant* of the creature to the *être* of the divinity. According to Richard Griffiths, Hello's expectation of the apocalypse was a product of «wishful thinking induced by disgust at his own physical and mental suffering»[19]. Thus, Hello writes: «de ce néant qui est en moi, je puis, par la pureté, par l'humilité […] permettre à Dieu de créer le monde; de ce même néant, par amour-propre, je crée l'immonde»[20]. Hello's longing for deliverance from the prison of corporeity is generalized as a wish for the Second Coming, which he communicated to Bloy (Griffiths, *ibid.*). «La flamme qui brûle dans mon coeur a pour proie le néant, la matière, la forme, toute créature réelle ou possible. Elle brise toute écorce à partir d'aujourd'hui, et la création est un monceau de cendre que le vent disperse aux quatre horizons»[21].

Like Hello, Bloy revels in masochistic abjection. Homelesss, friendless, hungry, and reviled, the poor man suffers, and, in so doing, issues a plea to God for clemency. The indignities he endures are another affront to the Savior, another lash of the whip, another nail in the hand, another mocking apostrophe to the King of the Jews.

Ordinarily, as Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel says of apocalyptic thinkers like Bloy, «mystic paranoia […] represents an attempt to project the ego ideal on to a divine figure, far from the flesh and blood father»[22]. But it is by becoming flesh and blood that the Son is made identical to the Father, whence Bloy's focus on the most ignoble aspects of the Incarnation. Christ bleeds, and the poor, who are the members of Christ's body, answer with their suffering, translated and expressed in "la symbolique des larmes".

First a language, suffering for Bloy is also a medium of exchange. Anticipating Bloy, Huysmans in *Là-bas* had also reflected on the interrelationship between the Eucharist and capital, suffering and nourishment. While the body of Christ is both food and the ransom for man's sins, money, as Huysmans's hero Durtal says,

(16) *Ibid*., p. 58.
(17) *Ibid*., p. 192.
(18) E. Hello, *Paroles de Dieu*, Paris, Perrin, 1899, p. 303.
(19) R. Griffiths, *The Reactionary Revolution: The Catholic Revival in French Literature 1870-1914*, New York, Ungar, 1965, p. 138.
(20) E. Hello, *Prières et méditations*, Paris, Arfuyen, 1993, p. 18.
(21) *Ibid*., pp. 14-15
(22) J. Chasseguet-Smirgel, *The Ego Ideal: A Psychoanalytic Essay on the Malady of the Ideal*, New York, Norton, 1975, p. 121.

is «l'aliment le plus nutritif des importants péchés»[23]. Christ's sacrificial death sublimates tortured flesh into risen spirit. Like money abolishing the material reality it replaces, Christ's Passion brings about a disappearance of the body, transmuting it into gladness born of deliverance from corporeity. Money, too, is an agent of hygienic annihilation, but as it begins by intensifying attachment to the goods that it occults, it ends by fetishizing itself as an instrument of destruction. Like a fetish, it hides absence behind obsession.

Condemned to a life of anonymity and need, Bloy equated the royalties he never earned with *le sang du pauvre* shed in a never-ending crucifixion. In the collection of accusatory essays that carries the same title, Bloy taxes the rich with perverting the sacramental feast, reconverting it to cannibalism. Starving, compelled to grub in the street for offal, the poor are consumed in the banquet of the wealthy. Obliged to dive into shark-infested waters to harvest pearls adorning the throats of aristocratic women, toiling in factories to make silk like the soft skin of its wearers, the poor work in conditions ordered by "le système de la sueur", like "la sueur de sang" shed by Jesus in Gethsemane.

First gravitating to the poetics of squalor, Bloy ends by representing things that are gone: unobtainable nourishment, the home from which one is evicted. It is for this reason that Bloy accords a grudging admiration to the miser, an enemy, like the saint, of self-indulgence and facile pleasure. Thus, the miser worships his divinity «*en esprit et en vérité*, comme les Saints adorent le Dieu qui leur fait un devoir de la pénitence et une gloire du martyre»[24]. Like those haloed by true penury, spiritually enriched by physical suffering, «[l]es avares sont des mystiques», as Bloy concludes[25].

When Bloy writes that «le Sang du Pauvre, c'est l'argent» (*Le Sang du pauvre*, p. 23), he refers to the rich man's exploitation of the poor. But the blood of the poor also has a sacramental property: «l'eucharistique argent qu'on *boit* et qu'on *mange*», the blood of victims, as Bloy writes «est la Torture et la Volupté»[26]. Money, for Bloy, is the force undoing the miracle of the sacrament. Like language which removes the material reality it symbolizes, it performs the dialectical magic of destruction and resurrection – «l'argent […] tue et […] vivifie comme la Parole»[27].

In Bloy's two novels, *Le Désespéré* (1886) and *La Femme pauvre* (1897), he illustrates the relationship of a spiritual feast to physical famine, worldly privation as the path to heavenly satiety. Bloy's characters are exemplars of the forsaken and oppressed, poor except in the blood and tears which, in their distress, they shed abundantly.

Bloy shared Huysmans's belief in the doctrine of *mystic substitution*, suffering whereby, as Paul writes in his letter to the Colossians, the apostle consents to "do what I can to make up all that has still to be undergone by Christ" (*adimpleo quae desunt passionum Christi*). According to Richard Burton, the «'merits' that [these martyrs] will accumulate will then 'revert' to the benefit not just of themselves but of the rest of non-suffering, impenitent humanity, whence the name of 'reversibility'»[28].

In *Le Désespéré*, Caïn Marchenoir, Bloy's hero, wishes to assume the task of the Carthusians, among whom he makes a winter retreat after the death of his father. He wishes to act as an agent of the apocalypse so that «les choses cachées [qui] nous doivent être révélées un jour» will explain «pourquoi tant de faibles furent écrasés,

(23) J.-K. Huysmans, *Là-bas*, in *Œuvres complètes,* vol. 12, Genève, Slatkine, 1977, p. 24.
(24) L. Bloy, *Le Sang du pauvre*, Paris, Stock, 1907, p. 225.
(25) *Ibid.*
(26) *Ibid*., pp. 23-24.
(27) *Ibid*., p. 24.
(28) R. Burton, *Holy Tears, Holy Blood: Women, Catholicism, and the Culture of Suffering in France, 1850-1970*, Ithaca, Cornell UP, 2001, p. xviii.

brûlés et persécutés dans tous les siècles»[29]. The «loi transcendante de l'équilibre surnaturel, qui condamne les innocents à acquitter la rançon des coupables»[30] explains the value of what, otherwise, is the unacceptable affront of gratuitous suffering. Crowning his protagonist with the majesty of his Christ-like mission, Bloy shows how pain is devoted to its eschatological remission, how the martyr's death brings a conflagration that ends the world.

In his novels, Bloy assigns his hero the same prophetic role he professed to exercise himself. Messenger of the apocalypse, he regarded his writing as an incendiary weapon, an instrument of sacred hygiene, ridding a corrupt society of its self-coddling immorality in preparation for the end time. Like Huysmans, whose messianic impatience fostered a sense of kinship with anarchists and bomb-throwers, Bloy used his text to undertake the work of the Exterminating Angel: «Le mot, quel qu'il fût, ignoble ou sublime, il s'en emparait comme d'une proie et en faisait à l'instant un projectile, un brûlot, un engin quelconque pour dévaster ou pour massacrer»[31].

A guest at a literary banquet attended by the art world's leading luminaries, Marchenoir unleashes poisonous diatribes against his celebrated counterparts – pseudonymous stand-ins for Paul Bourget, Catulle Mendès, Élémir Bourges, and J.-K. Huysmans. These "évangelistes du Rien," as Marchenoir describes them, are other undeserving fathers against whom Bloy's jealousy is directed, like the Jews whom Bloy, the anti-Semite, unceasingly disparages.

But it is primarily poverty that restores the purity of reality, emptying it of the worthless things with which people try to satisfy themselves. Asceticism recreates original innocence, preparing for the cataclysm that Bloy's character sees approaching. Without their promise of salvation, Bloy's books would be bleak, depressing narratives, stories of unremitting heartbreak and exclusion. As Richard Griffiths writes, it was in 1877 that Bloy met the young prostitute Anne-Marie Roulé, whom he felt obliged to rescue from homelessness and infamy. «In the process they became lovers, and soon Anne-Marie, having been converted, began to have the most amazing religious experiences and revelations»[32].

Unstable from the outset, Anne-Marie's mental health continued to deteriorate. All the while, her predictions of the imminent dawning of the Third Age of the Holy Spirit became more urgent and incoherent, and more believable to Bloy. Bloy was persuaded that an individual's life, like all of human history, could be envisaged «comme les hiéroglyphes divins d'une révélation par les symboles, corroborative de l'autre Révélation»[33]. It was from his spiritual mentor, Abbé Tardif de Moidrey, who had accompanied Bloy to La Salette in August of 1879, that the author drew his notion of a *universal algebra*, a comprehensive explanatory system for the "cryptogram" of history. As the destitution of the wretched required the Messiah to come and save them, so a dearth of existential meaning supposed a global semiosis. Poverty, consecrated by an embrace of absolute suffering, is what precipitates «l'avènement du parfait Pauvre, en qui se résumèrent les abominations les plus exquises de la misère»[34].

Bloy's stories enact on a microcosmic level the calamity of the apocalypse that will usher in a new reign of rejoicing and fulfillment. A seemingly unintelligible sequence of misfortunes besets Bloy's characters and their visionary consorts. After committing Véronique (the character modeled on Anne-Marie) to the asylum of Sainte-Anne,

(29) L. Bloy, *Le Désespéré* cit., pp. 118-119.
(30) *Ibid*., p. 118.
(31) *Ibid*., p. 168.
(32) R. Griffiths, *The Reactionary Revolution* cit., p. 139.
(33) L. Bloy, *Le Désespéré* cit., p. 169.
(34) *Ibid*., p. 178.

Marchenoir is run down by a truck on his mournful journey home. A letter expedited to his friend bidding him to sit with Marchenoir by his deathbed arrives too late. And a priest called to administer the last rites is occupied with other matters and fails to heed the summons.

Bloy's book stands as another unanswered petition directed heavenward, another cry to Christ who responds – as he had for centuries – with silence: «Les heures sonnèrent, – toutes les heures de cette journée de trépassement… Ni prêtre, ni ami, personne ne venait»[35].

In both *Le Désespéré* and *La Femme pauvre*, remission from suffering and confusion comes from attaining sainthood and carrying Christ's Passion to its conclusion, so that the end time can arrive, and the world and the self can be reborn. The apocalypse as revelation allows the cryptogram of history to be elucidated by reading it according to "la symbolique des larmes".

In *Crucified with Christ*, Dan Merkur comments on the therapeutic benefits of imaginatively participating in the Crucifixion. In Bloy, aggression targeting a messiah who never saves succeeds anger at a caregiver who never answers, the priest who never succors, the friend who never comes. Guilt incurred by resenting a deaf, delinquent Savior is banished by taking part in Christ's agony. In widening the focus from a persecuted self to the collectivity of the poor, Bloy moves from the Passion to compassion, absolving Jesus and himself, recovering the innocence he had lost. The unfortunate who consent to shed their tears and blood like Christ «cease[…] to be guilty of rage and hate, cease[…] to have unconscious cause to fear retaliation, and [are] additionally able to forgive themselves [….] Self-forgiveness constitute[s] permission to experience the euphoric ecstasy of a clear conscience [so that] resurrection follows»[36].

The sainthood Bloy aspired to comes not from a relationship with Christ, but from an immersion in the masses whose suffering Bloy imagines easing. Mystic substitution, practiced by suffering on behalf of others, carries out the Redeemer's mission and cements the bond with other outcasts. The persecution mania isolating Bloy's protagonist is overtaken by an experience of the world's death and a shared rebirth. The self-pitying, petulant, and unforgiving character is redeemed and crowned with sainthood through an act of sacrifice and charity. The doctrine of reversibility – «le nom philosophique du grand dogme de la Communion des Saints»[37] – is what affords a sense of brotherhood and holds out the promise of a blessed future. For Marchenoir, «[u]n acte charitable, un mouvement de vraie pitié chante pour lui les louanges divines, depuis Adam jusqu'à la fin des siècles; il guérit les maladies, console les désespérés, apaise les tempêtes, rachète les captifs, convertit les fidèles et protège le genre humain». Done freely, an altruistic act joins the individual to the community, reinforcing «une enveloppante et indestructible solidarité»[38].

Like Huysmans, who describes male saints' roles as persuasive and rhetorical («ils […] convertissent les idolâtres, agissent surtout par l'éloquence de la chaire») and who assigns woman the task of writhing «en silence, sur un lit»[39], Bloy discerns a uniquely female capacity for suffering. In *La Femme pauvre*, the despoliation of woman as a paradisiacal place is enacted in the character of Clotilde Chapuis, the *soror dolorosa* whose pain the author could only imagine. Following her life along the Way of the Cross, Bloy's novel concludes after the heroine has seen her protector die at the

(35) *Ibid*., p. 439.

(36) D. Merkur, *Crucified with Christ: Meditation on the Passion, Mystical Death, and the Medieval Invention of Psychotherapy*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2007, p. 88.

(37) L. Bloy, *Le Désespéré* cit., p. 142.

(38) *Ibid*., pp. 142-143.

(39) J.-K. Huysmans, *Sainte Lydwine de Schie-*

hands of a knife-wielding monster, her infant son choke on squalor and hopelessness, and her husband burn in a conflagration where he perishes rescuing strangers.

Reappearing as a secondary character, yet still a misanthrope and prophet, Caïn Marchenoir describes to Clotilde his own quest for woman as a lost Eden. In a parable of a modern-day pilgrim «qui cherche par toute la terre 'le Jardin de Volupté»[40], Marchenoir charts his journey toward a day that will bring a repatriation in man's beginnings. Seeking the New Jerusalem "prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Revelation 21.4), Marchenoir is told that paradise lost is a leper's colony where Christ walks among tombs beneath the Tree of Life.

Here Bloy seems to solve his own riddle, showing the penitent's translation from an earthly hell into a garden of delight, as he acquiesces to his crucifixion and awakens from time to eternity.

In the same hour that her husband burns alive, Clotilde experiences her own incineration in the furnace of the divine. A liberation which Bloy could experience only through authorial projection, Clotilde accedes to sainthood while still on earth. It is in the character of Clotilde that Bloy describes the consummation of sacred impoverishment, the perfection of destitution, a re-creation of *le néant* which only divine *être* can make full. An inverted image of the unfindable Eden, the mother who loses her child is topologized as the loss of everything, dispossession embodied as woman. Clotilde «a même compris […] que la Femme n'*existe* vraiment qu'à la condition d'être sans pain, sans gîte, sans amis, sans époux et sans enfants, et que c'est comme cela seulement qu'elle peut forcer à descendre son Sauveur»[41].

Without shelter, food, attachments, husband, or children, she awaits completion by the Son and the faithful who emulate him. The poor in Bloy are those who hasten the end time, and Bloy's text is the revelation that delineates their role.

From the outside, the author and his disinherited brethren glimpse the paradise of woman restored to her prelapsarian innocence. Nearby yet unreachable, it is the homeland of sufferers whom the Savior's return will transform into saints. It is the refuge of the lost from whom the burden is lifted and who are delivered instantaneously from time and separation. When one dies with Christ – «quand on est pauvre et crucifié»[42] – waiting is over and one escapes the lazaretto of the world. With his text, Bloy blackens the picture of the Gehenna of life in order to show the Parousia revealed by "la symbolique des larmes". Bloy's writing is a manner of biding his time until, as Jesus on the Cross had announced to the thief by his side: "*Hodie mecum eris in paradiso*"[43]. Until the Age of the Suffering Son is concluded and the era of the Holy Spirit begins, Bloy writes in order to abridge the period of exile – so that the Garden might be here and the apocalypse come today.

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dam, in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 15, Genève, Slatkine, 1977, II, p. 100.

(40) L. Bloy, *La Femme pauvre*, Paris, Mercure de France, 1971, p. 381.

(41) *Ibid*., p. 392.

(42) *Ibid.*

(43) *Ibid.*